

Faith to Follow
Pastor Cynthia Lapp
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John 6:56-61, 66-69
Hebrews 11 (selected verses)

It seems like a very long time since I have been in this pulpit. The summer has flown by and the pulpit has been full: with Justin here as intern, guest preachers Jenny Neme from Colombia, Kim McDowell from the University Park congregation and last week Ryan Thompson, MCC worker who served in Syria. Of course a number of you have preached as well. I am grateful for such gifts to be shared among us and that the Word comes to us in so many forms.

It is five months today that we moved into this space during the seasons of renovation at our building on East-West Highway. As the council and pastorate planned for this sojourning time, we were very clear that we did not want to refer to this as a time of exile or wandering in the wilderness; we wanted to stay away from metaphors like being aliens in a strange land. We wanted these months to be more than a static time of waiting to go back home.

But, we wondered, what would happen during our time away from our customary location? Would people who travel by Metro walk the extra blocks to get here? Would visitors find us at a new location? Would people who have been around awhile come less often during this time of transition? Would we still find our faith nurtured and growing in a different space? And would the Spirit still be at work among us in a different building?

We still have at least three more months worshipping in this space but after five months we can begin to answer some of these questions. Guests have indeed found us

here and have stayed to worship regularly. In fact, those of us who track the numbers have been surprised at the strong attendance we have had throughout our time here at University Park.

In several months, we hope by the beginning of December, we will transition back to the building on East-West Highway. We have to remember that there are some among us that only know this building as Hyattsville Mennonite Church; for those folks it will be a bit of a jolt to hear talk of moving back when the East-West Highway building is an unfamiliar space. At first it may feel unfamiliar to all of us.

Though we may not always understand our role in this geographical community, especially when we are inhabiting a new space, be assured we are part of the local network. Every week I hear from people in the neighborhood (who are not part of this congregation) that they are watching progress on the building. Soon after we moved in March, a neighbor told me that he had scavenged a movie screen that we had thrown out. He hoped it was okay that he repaired it for his own congregation to use.

Another friend recently told me how she loves knowing that we found a temporary home here at University Park. This Church of the Brethren congregation is known as being a good neighbor to those in the community, and it opens its doors to many groups and events. Now we are the beneficiaries of this generosity.

Numbers don't tell the whole story of course, but perhaps in citing these few examples we have begun to answer our other questions: is our faith growing and nurtured in these months? Does the Spirit continue at work among us? Where is it that we see God at work now? We might add another question: Will we fit back into the space known as Hyattsville Mennonite Church?

The passage from Hebrews 11 witnesses to the work of the Spirit and the ways our spiritual ancestors responded faithfully to God. This passage from the New Testament gives us a highlights tour through the Hebrew Bible. Many familiar (and some not so familiar) foremothers and forefathers are named, along with the conundrums they faced. (You might want to read the passage yourself to see the fuller list of those named.) The writer of Hebrews lists the people, adversities and sometimes strange circumstances that were overcome. Each time we are told that these people of God responded “by faith.”

Whether you keep an ear to God’s voice or not, everyone has difficulties. Some of the situations we read about in the Bible seem highly improbable, like getting pregnant after menopause or willingly offering up your son to be burned as a sacrifice. In each case, we are told, it was by faith that these people of God were able to do what seemed foolish and impossible. And a faithful God responded.

It is fairly easy for me to get cynical about a passage like this with its cheerful answer: Just have faith, like your ancestors did, God will pull you through.

In the midst of a crisis it is not always easy, or even advisable, to take that approach. When you feel alone in a health emergency, or when you are wondering about a job change or getting a job at all, or when, as the people of Syria or Congo, you are forced to flee your home because of violence, “just have faith” sounds almost like a cruel rejoinder.

I find it helpful to remember that it is only after the fact, looking back on these remarkable people and situations that we are able to see their faith. In the midst of walking through the Reed Sea (like Moses) or trying to figure out what to do with spies

who have come to your door (like Rahab), I am not sure that the ancestors felt themselves so faithful.

In fact, we know that the people of Israel, after they made it through the Reed Sea and saw the Egyptians drowned, still were not convinced that God was with them. They complained about walking, they complained about the food, the leadership of Moses and Aaron was not always the most inspiring. Sometimes it is only in looking back, when we see the whole picture, that we recognize faithfulness — our own and God's.

So what does it mean to be faithful? Is faithfulness walking into the unknown, doing what seems ridiculous, being faithful to what you have known in the past and hoping that the same is still true? Yes, we have to rely on our experiences and the experiences of others to help us know what the next steps might be. Part of faithfulness is looking back and learning from the past as we read in Hebrews.

But being faithful to the past traditions may not be the only way. We gather each week to celebrate a God that continually works in new ways to bring about a new creation. Sometimes faithfulness is moving into the future hoping that what was true in the past is not all there is. We step ahead in hope that there is something different and life giving just ahead. We walk in faith when all we have is hope.

How are we being faithful as a congregation these days as we walk together? Are we depending on what worked in the past? Are we stepping out into new territory?

As Christians we look to the Hebrew Bible for models of faithfulness, yes, but we also have the life and teachings of Jesus. And then we get a difficult text like the one from John that we heard today: Jesus instructs his disciples to eat his flesh and drink

his blood. It is irreverent to say so from the pulpit but this sounds an awful lot like it comes right out of the zombie culture. A simple search on the internet finds all kinds of t-shirts with zombie slogans that mock Christianity for eating flesh and drinking blood each week at communion.

If we feel grossed out, we aren't the only ones. This kind of talk was enough to cause some of the folks who were following Jesus, to mumble and whisper amongst themselves. 'What is he really saying? Where could he be going with this stuff? This is just a metaphor, right?'

John tells us that Jesus knew and understood that some people would find this too hard to comprehend. They couldn't move ahead with someone who talked this way. Many disciples left. Jesus turns to the remaining 12 and wonders if they will leave too. But Peter, ever faithful, says, we will stay. Somehow in this strange talk they feel the timelessness of his words, they have come to believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

What of us? What do we do with such strange language and imagery? When we prepare for communion we usually hear the phrase, "This is my body broken for you; this is the blood of the new covenant." We don't usually hear, at least not in this congregation, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood."

I don't know Greek, but Biblical scholars that work in Greek translate this passage in some interesting ways. One that caught my attention this week is the work of D. Mark Davis, a Presbyterian pastor in Iowa. He says in the original Greek there are two different words used in this passage: one that means "eat" and the other that might

better be translated “gnaw.” Jesus seems to be inviting his followers to “gnaw” on his flesh.

Here we are, right back to zombies. But it’s not just Jesus; we read in Psalm 38 “taste and see the goodness of God.” What can this mean, this very bodily response to God?

As Christians, we say that Jesus was the incarnation of God, God made flesh. In the gospel of John we hear that Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus’ words invite us to take his flesh into our own.

This is not the image of a sweet and fluffy, chocolate mousse Jesus that melts in the mouth. This is Jesus as beef jerky; we are not to swallow it whole but to chew on it, gnaw on it, bite down hard and keep working it. This is food that gives sustenance over the long haul, over rough trails and hard slogs. This is a Jesus who sticks to the ribs, who gives energy and life and becomes part of us as we make him part of our own flesh. Bread of life, gnawing on flesh. Incarnation indeed.

If we wonder what faithfulness looks like, this image of gnawing on flesh might be one to hang on to. The list of the faithful in Hebrews certainly weren’t given easy choices to make; they did not have uncomplicated lives. But they held on, wrestling with God.

In this time and place, in every time and place we can ask: Are we gnawing on this flesh, wrestling with the Word, allowing it to nourish and sustain us? Are we joining our own flesh to the Word?

Part of what it means to be faithful is spreading the Word, inviting others to the feast. When we share what has nourished and sustained us, we don’t just stand on the

corner with food scraps — little easy to eat, pre-chewed pieces of Jesus. We invite people to walk with us, so we can chew and gnaw on the Word, together.

There may a bit of impatience these next few months as we anticipate returning to our own space. But let's remember that we are not walking in aimless, hungry circles in the wilderness. We are following the Word.